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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2296

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3327

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000202

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/09/2019

TAGS: PREL AGMT ADPM TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: DIPLOMATIC POUCH ISSUE RESOLVED

REF: A. STATE 9696

¶B. ASHGABAT 162

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) On February 5, the Embassy was able to resolve a contretemps regarding the diplomatic pouch that had started two weeks before when the Customs Department at the Ashgabat airport started to insist that the Embassy send diplomatic notes in order to receive or send the diplomatic pouch. L determined that this requirement by the Turkmenistan Government was in contravention of Article 27(3) of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (Ref A). Charge urged quick resolution to the problem during his February 2 meeting with Foreign Minister Meredov (Ref. B). Meredov promised to go over the issue with the MFA Protocol Department and seemed to understand the seriousness of the matter.

¶12. (SBU) It was after this meeting that we started to see some movement, although not "officially." The Acting Head of Customs at the airport indicated to an Embassy FSN that "he had never said that a diplomatic note was required" for the Embassy to send and receive diplomatic pouches, even though that was his position just a few days before. When we did not get official confirmation from MFA February 5 that the problem was solved (MGT called the Chief of Protocol, but he claimed that no one had talked to him about resolution of the issue), we sent over the diplomatic note (Ref A) that outlined the U.S. position. Separately, IMO and an FSN went out to the Customs Office at the airport to see if they could get our mail. During the meeting, the Acting Head of Customs at the airport called his superiors in the Central Customs Office. Apparently, during the ten-minute phone call, he was instructed to sign and stamp the way bills and release the bags. The next day, the Embassy was able to send out a pouch without a problem.

WHAT HAPPENED?

¶13. (C) COMMENT: It appears that a typically Turkmen problem was solved in a typically Turkmen fashion. The new Acting Head of Customs decided that the U.S. Embassy needed to send diplomatic notes to pick up their large bags, just like some embassies (France, India, South Korea), but not others (UK, Germany, UN). When queried, the Chief of Protocol sent word to the DCM (with whom he is friendly) that the Customs Chief was wrong and the Embassy did not have to send a note, but reversed himself the next day after a meeting with an Embassy officer, whom he does not know well. It took a meeting with

the Foreign Minister to get beyond the Chief of Protocol and possibly to override the Acting Head of Customs at the airport, who appears to have been told to release the bags by his superiors. In the end, both the Acting Head of Customs at the airport and the Chief of Protocol took stands that allowed them not to lose face, but were irrelevant. The Customs official swore he had never said a diplomatic note was necessary, and the MFA Chief of Protocol insisted the rule requiring dip notes still stood. Both were incorrect.

¶4. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Yet, after all this, the Chief of MFA's America's Department warned us that this resolution was probably only good until new people replace the current ones (like the Head of Customs at the airport). Then the issue could surface again. Given the fact that we have seen (presumably) long-resolved issues pop up again, sometimes with the same players in place, we don't doubt this problem could yet again resurface down the road. END COMMENT.

MILES